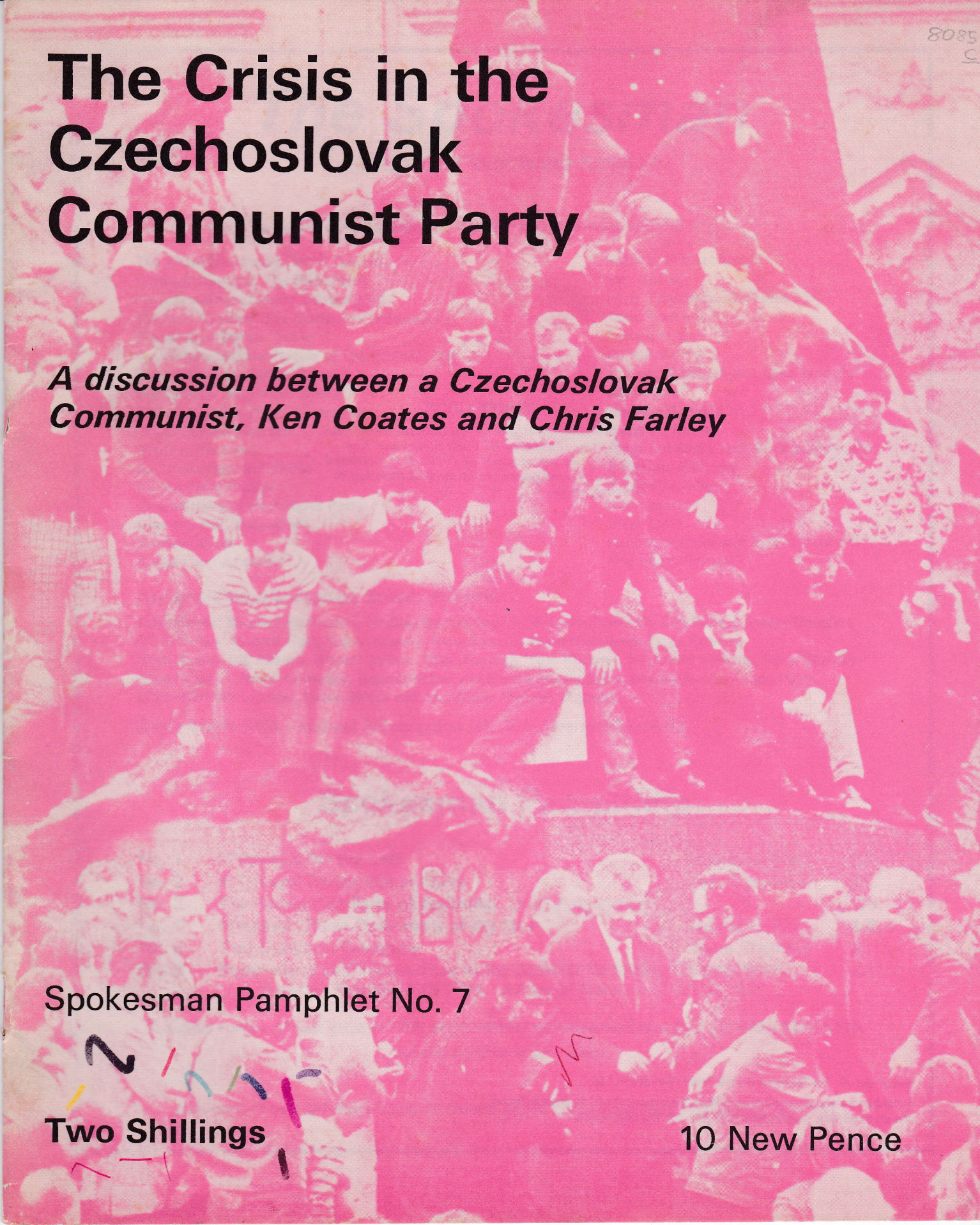
The Crisis in the Czechoslovak Communist Party

A discussion between a Czechoslovak Communist, Ken Coates and Chris Farley



Spokesman Pamphlet No. 7

Two Shillings 10 New Pence

INTRODUCTION

The following interview with a Czechoslovak Communist was conducted by Chris Farley and Ken Coates in the late summer of 1970. It is published as a background paper on the current situation in Czechoslovakia.

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Published by The Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation Ltd., 45 Gamble Street, Forest Road West, Nottingham NG7 4ET for The Spokesman. 11/70

Printed by The Partisan Press Ltd. T.U. Nottm.

The Crisis in the Czechoslovak Communist Party

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Chris Farley:

Perhaps we could begin by talking about the development of the purges and their different forms over recent months. Could you start by telling us how these are conducted and what are the important changes which are taking place with respect to the way they are operating?

Answer

The screenings are going on now and are, I think, far from being completed, because they have to go through the whole Party apparatus right down to the cells - the basic Party organisations - and it takes a long time because first you have to set up the special commissions who conduct the screening, and you have to have a special commission for each Party district, which beforehand knows more or less thoroughly the case of each individual Party member. As far as I know, Party members are asked about their Party activities, stressing especially their activities during '68 and '69 and their opinions of the Party policy during these two years, and again stressing especially in this context their attitude to the events of 21 August and their own opinion at that time or later - as most of the Party members realised much later the significance of the entry of the Soviet troops. They are also asked about their attitudes to the April Action Programme of the Party, and again, whether they believe that the greater part of that programme was based on revisionist premises. There was a long discussion conducted in the Party Press, and among Party Functionaries, about whether to have this screening conducted by calling individual Party men before the commissions, or whether to invite each man to appear with a few of his closest colleagues, who have worked with him in the Party or in a job, and who could thus act more or less as a corrective, supplying additional information, or pointing out when he had altered certain facts or omitted intentionally certain events. The Party Press very often stresses that many Party people have a very bad memory - certainly as far as the activities of 1968 go - and this second procedure might be a way to avoid that. In certain Party organisations, all this creates an atmosphere in which people can talk about the activities of others in order to conceal their own. You can blame the Chairman of the Party cell to which you belong for suggesting the wording of certain types of resolution, of which hundreds and thousands were signed and sent to the Central Committee during 1968. There are very few Party cells which did not send such resolutions, condemning the invasion, and so on. Therefore, it is possible to blame certain individuals in the Party cell for suggesting such things, making yourself out to be a passive man or one misled by others.

Of course, the Party stresses that there are three categories of Party people, which ought to be remembered by the Party commission. You have the ones who always maintained what they call "the good, internationalist, Marxist position" through '68 and '69, and permanently criticised the rightist opportunists and the revisionist tendencies, but the Party admits that these people, however brave, were always in the minority. Then you have the majority of the Party people, who were good and honest Party men but were misled during '68-'69 by the Party itself, by the Party leadership, who during '69 and even '68 fell into the hands of rightist opportunist leaders and were very much influenced by what they call "a second Party centre". Of course, the honest Party man was not involved very much in Party affairs and could not distinguish the truth from a lie, and, above all, he was completely misled by the mass media, which were completely in the hands of rightist opportunists. But although these people were active in '68 or signed the

wrong resolutions, if they admit their mistakes and if they publicly or inside the Party acknowledge that they are aware of their wrong positions and that now they support the present Party policy, based on the resolution of the May 1969 Plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, and all the points which are very clearly defined in the resolution of the May Plenum, then the Commission will very likely come to the conclusion that their Party cards can be renewed and that these men are still good enough for the Party. Quite a number of Party men are believed to belong to this kind of category and therefore you have to conduct a campaign of persuasion and explanation of many things in '68-'69, in order to save the majority of these people for the Party. And then you have the third category, who were always true, genuine rightist opportunists and who were just waiting in the Party rank and file in the early and late 'sixties for the chance to use the Party apparatus for their own ambitious, rightist opportunist ends, and they misused the good intentions of the January 1968 Plenum. These ought, during the Party screening, to be distinguished very clearly from the second category of people who were just misled, and the main purpose of this screening is to make the dividing line between the genuine rightist opportunists and the misled majority. Of course, they claim the tactics of the last category are to mislead the screening commission into thinking they belong to the second category, and stay in the Party ranks and await another chance, or another '68, to take the Party leadership into their hands. Therefore, questions ought to be put to the Party members in such a manner as to force a man to clear himself, to define himself in such clear terms that if he is a genuine rightist opportunist he cannot disguise himself as just being a misled man. For this, you need information about his Party politics: if he was really the instigator of the resolutions, if he openly attacked the invasion or if he criticised the Soviet Union even before the invasion, as some Party men did, especially after the Warsaw letter in the summer of '68. The letter of the Central Committee of the Communist Party mentions especially the subject on which the Party men ought to be questioned during their screening - the 21 August happenings and their attitude towards them - and it especially mentions the Smrkovsky campaign in January 1969, saying Party people must very clearly define whether they agreed with the campaign and participated in it; and, if they did so, whether they were asked by someone, and, if so, who, or whether they participated on their own initiative; and whether they now agree that it was a wrong thing to do. Another subject about which they often ask concerns attitudes to Jan Palach's suicide and the nation's reaction to it in that fortnight in the middle of June 1969. Quite a number of party members, especially worker members, are asked what were their attitudes to the campaign for workers' councils, and their attitudes to the discussion on the law? What was their attitude to the spontaneous creation of these workers' councils and what were their activities in some of the factories where, the Party says, the workers' councils tried to concentrate too much power in their own hands, especially power which, in effect, belonged to the Party or to the trades unions or to the director and these workers' councils more or less tried to concentrate all the power belonging to other sections. So they are asked if they believed this was right and what were their activities, and when they found out it was wrong. Were they the leaders of it or just passive followers? And so on...

I think the Party screening differs very much according to the social group the Party member comes from. It is very much defined in terms of the activities of the person in his particular job. This means, if he is a worker, he is very likely to be asked about the question of the workers' councils and the question of particular resolutions which concern the factory; or, if he is an intellectual, he is asked his opinion of the activities of various intellectual organisations and unions and their standpoints.

Ken Coates:

Is there any support among workers, any real support, for the objects of the purge? Would you say that there are groups of workers who are drawn to accept that the purge is justified or valid?

Answer:

No, I would not define it as "groups" of workers. There are certainly individual workers who do so, and the Party Press very cleverly uses them, and you have details of their campaigns inside the Party Press.

Ken Coates:

I didn't mean groups in the sense of political groups, I meant sociological formations. Are there certain social layers of workers who are, by virtue of their position, prone to sympathise with the purge?

Answer:

I would define it from the other side, because

I wouldn't like to be attacked by certain groups of workers that I accused them of agreeing with policy which is regarded by practically the whole of our nation as a collaborationist policy. Unlike the Novotny regime, this regime has no support of any social group as such. The Novotny regime more or less relied on the passive tolerance of certain social groups and layers of the workers, or even on the peasants in some parts of the country. This regime relies on the Party apparatus, on the suppressive part of the government apparatus, and on the army - the foreign army. It does not rely on the working class. Therefore, it is very difficult to define even a layer of workers in the terms you mention, because that would vice versa mean that the Government policy more or less has support, or is based on these workers, or can rely on them, which it would be unjust to say. So I would define it from the other side: that you cannot always talk, as I think you cannot in any other country, about the working class as such and their monolithic, united attitude to certain political events. The working class is differentiated and it is a normal, natural result of 20 years' policy, during which the Novotny regime especially tried not only to create gaps between various social groups - students, intellectuals and workers - and to isolate them. It kept workers in the factories, students in the universities, intellectuals in the libraries. It supplied them with a small amount of information and created artificial barriers between them while forbidding all horizontal contacts, in order to manipulate them much more easily. But also, it managed to create similar gaps and barriers among the working classes themselves - between various industries and various layers among the working classes - which were more or less successfully overcome during '68 and '69, though certain remnants will always exist.

I have given you a long introduction explaining why I think you should define it from the other side. There were, in '68 and '69, layers of workers, or workers in particular industries, who were more "progressive", more active in their support of certain policies than others. For example, the workers in the metallurgical industry, the workers in the printing industry and railway workers were always more active and more politically minded and accepted more radical, more progressive attitudes than, say, miners or maybe certain layers of the building industry. From this point of view, there is also a different reaction to the Party screening now. I know there is more contempt for the Party screening from the workers in the metallurgical industry, for example. Or if you take, for example, Ostrava, a great industrial complex, the steel workers there, in one of the biggest steel works in the whole Republic. In '68 and '69 the workers there always adopted a very progressive attitude, and they have a more negative attitude now to the screening and its objects than you would find in, say, miners in the same district in Ostrava. Or if you take Brno, the people in the heavy machinery industry in Brno, the metallurgical industry, could be compared with the steel workers in Ostrava, and are more active and their resistance to the present policy is better than, say, in the biggest arms factory in Brno. They fairly actively criticised the present Party policy, including the screening, up to a certain stage, and when it became fairly difficult in any public way to openly oppose the policy, this was transformed into a stage of passiveness. This was not the passiveness of the Novotny type, which was a fatalistic passiveness of not bothering, of silently accepting. Even if they did not think very much of the regime, the workers then thought more in terms of their own factory and the relations between themselves and the trade union cell in their own factory and its activities. For them, the Party meant two things: the abstract Party leaders somewhere very far away and the Party cell in their factory, and when they talked of the Party they often mentioned not the Praesidium but the secretary or the chairman of the Party cell in their own factory. They talked more about the trade union leaders, because they thought they were not really representing them in their own factory. But the general political situation was not really in the centre of their interests and discussions or their thinking.

The present passiveness is different: it's a negative passiveness; it is an imposed passiveness because you cannot express your critical attitudes and you don't want to offer support. You are silent and wait for a moment when you can again express your negative attitude.

Ken Coates:

Do the workers want to survive in the Party, or do they want to be purged? I mean, what is the attitude of the militant? Does he want to fool the commission and survive?

Answer:

In your first sentence you said "worker" and in the second you said "militant", which have two different meanings. A militant worker would like to be purged or, even more correct,

the militant worker doesn't wait for the purge. He just hands over his Party card. And he did that a long time ago. You have to realise that the Party policy in its present stage was ineffective a long time ago. It has been more or less clear since the May Plenum that if the militant worker disagreed with the conclusion of the resolution of the May Plenum, which is not vague but a very clear resolution, and if he did not want to participate in this policy, if he did not want to take the responsibility of being a member of a Party which conducts this policy, then he has handed over his Party card since May, or even before, since April. That resolution of the May Plenary is always referred to as stating the basic points of the present Party policy and, I think, if Husak is to stay in power this will remain so. They will redefine it possibly after he goes. But that is the present Bible. Therefore, more than a year is an enormously long time for a worker-militant to find out where he stands and hand over the Party card, and many workers have done that. An enormous amount of militant workers, especially young workers, have voluntarily resigned from the Party, which in effect, the Party admits. It is not, of course, great headlines, but if you listen to the Party functionaries and talk to them, or if you read the Party Press very carefully, it is there, and they are fairly scared about it because they need to preserve an image of a "workers' Party", as they call themselves.

I think the Party is honest in saying that the Party screenings are not aimed against the workers as such, as a social group. They are scared of having a small Party elite composed of a few intellectuals of a type which will serve any regime, and are anyway not reliable because if any change takes place this type of intellectual, in order to save himself and his own existence, will change his opinions again. They don't want a party limited only to Party bureaucrats, whose acceptance of the regime is for them a question of existence, so either they accept it and continue in their jobs, which is the only thing they are able to do and which they have done for their whole life, or they are jobless, and, in fact, with no hope of finding a job because they have no other qualifications. But the Party leaders themselves know that these kinds of supporters are not really very reliable, so they need to have a certain percentage of workers in the Party.

Chris Farley:

But they also need a reliable Party?

Answer:

Yes.

Chris Farley:

And this is the main purpose of the screening?

Answer:

Yes. That means the result of these two objects is that in order to be a reliable Party, you are not just cutting out the genuine rightist opportunists, as I defined them in the third category, you are also cutting out, and consciously cutting out, the passive members who you are sure were never leaders of the reform movement and are so passive that there is a guarantee they will even maybe support passively this Party policy. No, not "support", that is not a good word. They will just pay their money in and do nothing. The Party, which after 1948 accepted the policy of taking as many of these kinds of people into the Party and claim to have a great, massive Party, has now changed its mind, solely, I think, because of the 1968 experience. They have found out that if you have even a small change among the active part of the Party, then the active people can use the passive lot for their own aims, and the 1968/69 period persuaded them that these passive people are more likely to support the Dubcek type of reforms than the present Party policy, and they could use the Party machinery against the present Party leaders, who are in a society which now stresses again the leading role of the Party. Therefore, all possibilities of conducting power are in the hands of the Party-leaders, and it is very difficult to get anywhere near any decision-making from outside the Party. They think it is more wise and more reliable to have these masses of passive Party men, who were, maybe, indoctrinated by what they call "the rightist opportunists and revisionists tendencies", outside the Party now and maybe later, one by one, if they actively start to support the Party policy, take them back. But now it is too dangerous to have this flock of passive Party men inside the Party where they could be used, and they don't trust them. As you say rightly, the Party is now prepared to trust only those Party men who will actively support the Party policy, not passively.

The second thing, as I stressed, is that they need to have a good percentage of workers in the Party. As a result of the first object, they cut the Party down to about three-quarters. I think the latest figures are about 400,000 to 500,000 Party men, and the screenings are not completed yet.

But in order to have a fair amount of workers in it, some of the screening gets another object, which is more or less a secondary object, that you cannot really keep in the Party a worker just because he's a worker. That's too dangerous because he might be a militant worker, he might be an open supporter of the rightist opportunist tendencies, so you don't negotiate with this man only because he's a worker, that's too dangerous. Or if he was a very active supporter of the workers' council movement he has to leave the Party. The compromise workers will never go so far, that is beyond a doubt. On the other hand, because there were quite a number of workers who belonged to this category and therefore have to be expelled, and because there are quite a number of workers, as I stated before, who themselves resigned from the Party, and as there is very little hope now that you will get workers to enter the Party and the Party admits that there is great difficulty in getting new young Party members from the workers - the only thing you can do in order to keep the workers' percentage in the Party on a fairly high level is to expel some of the intellectuals or white collar workers, in order to have a somewhat better percentage. And therefore some of the intellectuals get expelled from the Party only for this purpose, not for their own activities in 1968/69. Therefore, you get a strange sort of situation, in that you have a white collar worker or an intellectual being expelled for what they call a "structure of the Party" reason. He is an intellectual and he ought to go out because we need to have a workers' Party, but he was not himself so active in 1968/69 and therefore he is not an enemy, he is a potential supporter. Therefore you expel him from the Party but you let him keep his job. Normally, if you are expelled from the Party, defined as an enemy, you ought to leave your job also. Quite a number of intellectuals who were active in '68 and '69 and had fairly good jobs of course automatically lose their jobs after they are expelled from the Party, but intellectuals who are expelled because of "structural reasons" are not in the highest jobs, of course, but still in fairly important jobs, which is a factor completely unknown in the pre-January regime. Being expelled from the Party automatically meant to go into a manual job and very rarely to return back to the sphere in which you were.

Chris Farley:

What about the circumstances of the militant workers who voluntarily resigned from the Party? How does that affect their work?

Answer:

Not very much. It depends where you come from. The intellectuals who, naturally, because of their social group, are more vulnerable, play the game more often than the workers, adopt tactics and try to fool the commission and try to use vague sentences which will still get them through the screening and will, in their own eyes, not make fools of them and not dirty their conscience so much. The technicians and the intellectuals are more prone to play this kind of game than the worker. The worker does not see the reason for such a game, because he is not so vulnerable. You can't really punish a miner who hands over his Party card so much. It is much less damaging for a worker than, say, for a scientist who works in the historic institute and wants to finish his research and is now thrown out. He may be thrown out if he is a well-known man or if he is capable of expressing his attitude very clearly. The Novotny regime always expelled intellectuals from their jobs once they disagreed and sent them to the factories in the hope that the manual work would educate them and bring them back to their senses. This regime cannot do that, because the situation in the working class has changed so much that it is now extremely dangerous to send dissident philosophers, historians or intellectuals to the factories. It will create an even more dangerous situation for the Party than before. Therefore, even now it is fairly difficult to find a job for, say, a philosopher who is not allowed to work manually in Prague. Quite a number of them would very much like to do so and are unable to find a job. Then, you have a second factor, which was not very common in the Novotny regime, that the regime is scared of great industrial complexes and of big towns. Therefore, if you lose your job as an intellectual, or even as a very good, qualified worker, it is often difficult to find jobs say, in Prague, even a manual job, and you have to go to a small town. It is hoped that people of this kind will be isolated, and if you break communications and isolate them you can create and increase the atmosphere of apathy and hopelessness and be more successful in manipulating the social groups, as Novotny was. Therefore, it is not surprising that so many people are now either jobless or go into enormous inventions to find steady jobs in Prague - jobs which will last about two months and then somebody makes certain decisions and checks them out and they have to find another job. On the other hand, what I find very encouraging is that there are now many people in Prague who devote their time and energy to finding jobs for people who

lost their jobs because of their political convictions, if they are intellectuals or qualified workers. There is a great sense of solidarity with the dissident, which was never so strongly felt under the pre-January regime. The result of this falls very much on what is now in Prague called the Cernik type of people, the people who were identified with the reform movement, let us say, and then recanted in order to save their position. They will never be trusted by the present Party leaders because they once went against them, they once "betrayed the cause", but because they cannot continue opposition they will never again be trusted by the people. Therefore, they are the ones who are now really isolated and in a difficult situation, because nobody is going to help them.

Ken Coates:

That really leads me to ask you about the opposition, which obviously works under very considerable difficulties. How far are the decisions of the clandestine Party Congress kept alive in Czechoslovakia? What degree of loyalty is there to these decisions and what structure does the opposition take? The question that concerns me in particular is, how one can keep alive an idea when one is not allowed to give it any organisational forms?

Answer:

First of all, this is connected with another question. Not only how alive are the decisions of the Fourteenth Congress, but how alive is the idea of having a better, reformed Communist Party as a leader, or as an avant garde of the movement for a better society, a genuine socialist society. That question was very easily answered in '68. When the Russians in '68 suspected, or made the accusation, that the Communist Party was losing control, the counter-revolutionary groups and elements were misusing the '68 reforms in order to undermine the Party position, it was laughable. Anyone who was in Prague and lived in Czechoslovakia at that time knew that the Party's authority, the Party's position in the eyes of the nation had improved for the first time. In fact, it was more or less the second time. They had very good support after the last war for various reasons, unlike in many other East European countries, and this aspect is too often underestimated in Western countries. The Communist Party in the '46 election was really the strongest party, and it was more or less a free election. One ought to remember that.

But in '68 they did have genuine support from the overwhelming majority of people, almost all the people. The oppositionists were completely negligible, and no-one in Prague took them in the least bit seriously. I speak of Prague not of Washington or Moscow. But the situation has changed now very much. The Party discredited itself. The support the Party rallied behind itself in August 1968 is the kind of support, I think, that will never happen again. I think only a miracle would save the Party now as an avant garde of the workers' movement. If you will allow me to speculate for a minute, they would have to create an illegal party out of the 450,000 who were expelled, or the few hundred thousands who remain faithful to a genuine socialist cause, go through a thorough work in underground and fight back for the trust of the workers and of the Czech and Slovak nation. That would be a very difficult task for them, and I am not sure if they are able to do it. But that is the only hope for the Communist Party. The present Party leadership and the Party policy in the last year, or $1\frac{1}{2}$ years, has discredited the Party as such so much amongst the masses in Czechoslovakia that it is now very hard to imagine a way in which they will again achieve even a fair amount of trust and support from the workers in Czechoslovakia. And the question you ask, how much the decisions of the Fourteenth Party Congress are alive now, is very closely connected with that. The Fourteenth Congress and the decisions there are decisions which the people and the workers certainly support and approve of. There is no doubt about that. The materials of the Fourteenth Congress are fairly well known in Czechoslovakia. But the Fourteenth Congress is too much linked with the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. You can't change that. You can say that it was the last legal act of that Communist Party before the Moscow Protocol, and therefore you can adopt the attitude that quite a number of former Communists adopt, that anything which the Party did after the Fourteenth Congress is an illegal act and therefore cannot be taken as an act of the Communist Party. Therefore, you can judge the Communist Party only on the merits of what they did until the Fourteenth Congress. That is a possible attitude, yes, and many former Communists adopt it, but it is a very sophisticated attitude in the eyes of the ordinary worker, who judges the Party as a Party whose activities he followed, say, from January 1968 up to today as one Party. Of course, certain people were changed. Unfortunately, we still have certain people whose names were fairly popular in 1968 and who still remain in the Party leadership and therefore help to

continue the impression of the continuity of the Party. You can supply the names yourselves. So the question you ask is really the question of how much support this Party has, and my answer is: very little, especially among the militant workers and especially among the younger generation.

There is a new movement and new line of thought which was unknown before. All the people who disagreed with various aspects of the Novotny regime were united in negation of the Novotny regime.

They agreed very much that they wanted a socialist society. It's rubbish that there were strong political groups that wanted to return to any kind of capitalism. This was either wishful thinking on the part of Washington or an accusation in Moscow, but never taken seriously in Czechoslovakia. But, of course, they differed once you go on and define genuine socialism in more clear terms, which is a natural thing. And also, even more than that, they would differ on methods which were to be used in order to achieve a socialist society. But in 1968, despite these differences, all these groups were prepared to unite, maybe temporarily, (but unfortunately we were not allowed to see) in order to support the group known now as the reformists led by Alexander Dubcek. And because this group was not allowed to carry its reforms to their full implementation because of pressure from outside, all these groups inside the country, in or outside the Party, temporarily united in order to support the Dubcek Group and see how far they would go, what type of society they would create, and give them full support in their attempt to create such a society. Of course, there was always the question, and it's naive not to admit it, that if the Russians had not come in on 21 August and the Dubcek group was allowed to carry out their reforms to their full implementation, there would possibly no longer be that marvellous, beautiful unity of the nation behind them, as there was in 1968. I say Dubcek but I don't mean him personally, I mean the Party leadership which was in power in his time and the reformers who supported him. They would encounter opposition from other groups who also wanted a socialist society, but had a slightly different attitude on, say, opposition and the role of the Party and methods used, etc., and of course regarded Dubcek in 1968 as much less evil than, say, any threat of a Novotny regime, or Soviet occupation, or anything of that kind, and therefore supported him.

Now, when the question is posed slightly differently, and there is no longer this sort of "tactical" need to support the reformists, except for supporting an individual morally when he loses his job, etc., you don't find any of that great unity which the Dubcek leadership had in 1968. Of course, you don't find people rejecting their ideas, no, but they are trying to find new methods, and one new line of thought is not to try to create exactly the same situation as you had in January 1968, and find a new Dubcek who would reform the Party and lead the country again to a paradise, but to create a new revolutionary Marxist party on Marxist premises, which would not battle always against the history of the Communist Party, against the discredited name which the Communist Party has now, to start with the trust and support of the toiling masses on socialist premises without that past which binds you too much. Of course, support for this kind of party is very difficult to define now for various reasons. First of all, you can't discuss the question of a new revolutionary Marxist Party openly in Czechoslovakia now. You don't have any means of doing so, and therefore it is difficult to find out how much support you would have. Possibly not very much. More, of course, than in 1968 or any other year since the last war, but objectively speaking it would be just a sort of significant, functioning, working minority who might be able to create a party and who might even set a party to work, like the group which created the Revolutionary Socialist Party was, but that's about all. I think people might even go on and passively support such a party, but it would take time before this party could at least hope to get a genuine, nation-wide support. They have more chance, more hope of getting such support than the Communist Party, that is why I mentioned it, but even for them it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible.

The prevailing thought now is not to rely on any party, either a reformed Communist Party or a new revolutionary party, and, considering the present circumstances and conditions in the country, to rely not on a party but on a movement, a more or less informal movement which will be based on many relatively independent, organised, disciplined groups with one general line which will be common to all the groups, with one general aim, but not with a tight party organisation. It has many advantages, above all, a security one. You can unite the people in one group. You can't really destroy a whole movement. You can destroy a small party, completely. And the security question is very important now, in Czechoslovakia, which is an occupied country. Many people in the West tend to forget

that. Second, especially among the younger generation and very much among the workers, there is a prevailing distrust of parties as such, because of the experience we had. There is a feeling that we ought to go through a process of self-reflection, of defining our interests in the present conditions of the country, interest of various social groups or just citizens who disagree with the occupation. We shall go further than this and define our interests as a social group inside the society, our interests in terms of aims, in terms of a fight against the occupation and for a genuine socialist society. And that process will take a time. At the end of that process you would create a situation which you don't have there now. You must create a situation in which these groups will be able to define their socialist programme, therefore it will be more or less the first time that a socialist programme can be created as a result of the agreement of the rank and file on such a programme It won't again be a programme imposed on the workers, on the masses, from above. That could be a very good programme, like the Action Programme of April 1968,* which was the most progressive programme the Communist Party ever offered to the nation. They had no other chance then to do it in any other way; lack of time, lack of experience, lack of knowledge, many other things. I am not attacking that, I am a great supporter of the Action Programme, but the method was of the type for which we don't have support any more. There is no hurry now, as there was in 1968. The general, prevailing mood is that there are years and years of fight ahead of us. There is no hurry and too many mistakes were made in Czechoslovakia because of hurry. Because we wanted to do as many things as possible when there was still time. Now there is an enormous amount of time in front of us and we don't want to repeat the mistakes we made before. For the first time, we ought to rely on really genuine support among the rank and file of the workers of the whole Republic and the country ought to be more prepared, more politically aware, more psychologically prepared for a fight for socialism, even against our traditional allies, which is a very important question in Czechoslovakia, because, unlike many other East European countries, we still regarded the other socialist countries, even in 1968, even before 21 August, as our potential allies, although we were critical of their attempts to impose their model of socialism on us, and sometimes highly critical. Today you have these more or less futile discussions about whether we should have fought in 1968 or not. I mean, if we should have resisted with arms or not. And of course many people criticise the Dubcek leadership for not asking for armed resistance. I think that even if there had been a leader who would ask for armed resistance in August 1968, the nation was not psychologically prepared to fight.

See the Action Programme of April 1968, available from BRPF Publications, Spokesman Pamphlet No. 8.

Ken Coates:

Surely the big problem was not whether you should fight with arms in hands, but whether you should fight politically. I mean, the question is not one of whether you should have shot the Bulgarians, but whether you should have disaffected them, because they have the same problems that you have in Bulgaria and the same in East Germany, and the problem was one of spreading the discussion which had been opened up in Czechoslovakia through the whole of the East European area.

Answer:

Yes. That is the second mistake we made. But it need not be exaggerated. The truth is that we were too much absorbed during 1968 in our own problems, too much absorbed in achieving changes in the internal system, improving the internal system, so that there was not really the time or the conditions for permanent, conscious attempts to seek allies among similar groups in other socialist countries, or, for that matter, among the Western New Left. The Czechoslovaks were more sort of pragmatists, and they were involved too much in the everyday policy in the country, although there were attempts to get in touch with these potential allies, but it was not done on any conscious, permanent basis. I agree that could be interpreted as a mistake. Also, it is understandable and explainable because of the conditions in the country then. But the second thing is whether there were conditions for that immediately after the invasion, or during the invasion. You certainly know, it was reported in the Western mass media too much, that the first reaction of the people was certainly not attempts to resist with arms. It didn't matter what the call of the leaders was. The first reaction was to talk and discuss and persuade the Russian soldiers that there was no counter-revolution and they had nothing to do in Czechoslovakia. The best thing they could do for socialism was to return and go home. The second stage would be to go home and fight for similar reforms, I think, in their own respective countries. But you also know that the results, the success of such discussions are doubtful. Then I think

you ought to differentiate. The discussions mostly reported were discussions with Soviet soldiers.

I think the Soviet Government has succeeded in things in which none of the other Governments has succeeded, in blocking the information completely to their own population and isolating them so much from other social groups in the country, from any source of information from their own potential allies from outside the Soviet Union, that they have succeeded in creating generations which really believe what they are told, which really believe that what "Pravda" writes is the truth and who are psychologically prepared to believe, if the Soviet leaders say that there was counter-revolution, then there was counter-revolution. We saw it in Prague when the Soviet discussions with the Czech citizens, received copies of "Pravda". They got back their self-assurance, they got back their confidence that they were there to suppress counter-revolution. If they did not see counter-revolution around themselves, there ought to be one because "Pravda" said so. That kind of attitude is possibly much more difficult to find in, say, soldiers coming from Poland or Hungary, but you do find it in the Soviet citizen and therefore the discussion with Soviet soldiers or, for that matter, with Soviet citizens if they have travelled there, is much more difficult and success from the result of that is much more doubtful and could be regarded as a sort of good and necessary contribution to a fairly long process, with some small success in a very distant future. I think that to a certain extent this also applies to the Bulgarians whom you mentioned. The discussions with, say, the Polish or Hungarian soldiers were on a very different level, because of the history of their respective countries. Therefore, soldiers from these countries were not on our soil for such a long time and the units from these countries were not really regarded as being very reliable.

It is, in this context, necessary to stress that there were sporadic attempts to communicate with groups of similar sorts in Poland and Hungary before and after the invasions and even now, with success which is very difficult to define. Nevertheless the communication is, I think, much better and the hope for further co-operation is higher than with groups in the Soviet Union, or, for that matter, in Bulgaria. That question is very difficult to discuss also because I suspect you are going to publish this and it is our intention not to draw the attention of the present leaders of any of the socialist countries to communication between the present Czech opposition and the rebel groups in Hungary and Poland. So we state that this is our intention, we believe very much in this, but I don't regard this as the right time to discuss it in more concrete-terms. It is not necessary.

Ken Coates:

The problem that seems to me to be crucial, though is that following what you say about the state of the Communist Party, it seems to me that you are still caught in a difficult problem: that the only programme that makes sense is a programme which opens up the issues of socialist advance to discussion by workers. To have a programme which commits itself to one or other form of solution to the problems is more than is either necessary or possible. What was important about 1968 was that the Party was beginning to open the door to democratic decision-taking about the future of socialism in Czechoslovakia. What was not important was that Ota Sik was the author of an economic policy. That was one of the possible policies. The crucial question was that this matter was coming into the political market place for decisions. Open that forum, give people the right to choose, and it seems to me that that is always the position that you are in. There will always be the possibility of a Sik way of organising a socialist economy, or the possibility of Che Guevara's way of organising a socialist economy: a possibility of a choice between emphasis on material incentives or emphasis on moral incentives and social distribution. And the question can't be answered a priori. All the regimes have answered it, but when they have answered it they have done so with an administrative fiat, so that in China all the Siks are in prison and in Russia all the Guevaras went to prison. The answer, in itself, is not the most important question. What is important is that the workers themselves will have a changing opinion about whether they should pay themselves a welfare wage, a social wage in instalments of communism or whether they should first improve material things, wages, and so on.

Answer:

Yes, that is what I would stress. However good a programme any reformers could formulate, the present method, whether the method was of Sik and Novotny or Sik and Dubcek, or any of Sik's programmes, was always a

programme formulated by a group of experts or by a group of Party leaders and suggested then to the workers. The difference was a difference in degree, a difference in how much discussion you allowed on that programme. Novotny never allowed any discussion or anything, although he claimed that there was nation-wide discussion on any suggestion, and then you found out that the result, after this discussion, was an identical position. That means that either the whole nation agreed or there was no discussion.

You are right in saying that the Communist Party in 1968 opened the door to more democratic discussion on socialism, more democratic discussion on the suggestions of programmes. The Action Programme was more discussed among the nation, among the workers, than any other programme I know. True. But still it was not, and could not be in those circumstances, a programme which would originate among the workers, among the rank and file of the population, and I think it is high time for this programme we outline to be solved by discussion among the rank and file, and the decision will be left to them, and they will not merely be asked to comment on certain nuances of what either Sik or Che Guevara has laid down as the one true path.

The Czechoslovak working class is highly experienced politically anyway, because of the rich history they have, so it is ridiculous to underestimate their abilities to formulate a programme. So they themselves should be allowed to state their priorities and I very much believe, that the Czech working class is capable of that. But not even the Communist Party in its most progressive stage had the courage to go so far. Even the most progressive Communists, whom we supported very much and trusted, had certain fears in the back of their minds of what would happen if all the demands from the workers' councils were implemented; fears about what the workers would do if the workers' councils had more power than was intended. They didn't even trust a movement which supported them if it was not totally conducted within the Party or if it was not controlled by the Party. They were not fully aware of it, but they were sub-consciously aware that their popularity amongst the population increased very much and they were afraid that such a movement, even an informal and not strictly organised movement, might go over their heads. So the Communist Party had that type of limitation even in 1968, in its most progressive stage.

Ken Coates:

It would be very interesting if they had had a consistent attitude on this question, but they seem to have fallen between two stools. If they had been consistent in saying that the Party must remain in control, then more important than the problem of unauthorised links between students and workers was the unauthorised intervention of the Soviet Union: and the answer to that would have been at all costs to have maintained the unity of the Party leadership, which would have gone into exile and which might have offered up various people as spokesmen and clandestine organisers, and so on. To fight in that way, by the response of politically integral forces, there is a case for this. It is straight old-fashioned Leninism. They could have taken the majority of the Central Committee or even the whole of the fourteenth Congress to Belgrade, and if they had done that they would not only have held the line in Prague, they would also have caused a confrontation between Brezhnev and Tito.

Answer:

I am not quite sure how far that it would go. I mean, Tito himself seemed afraid of...

Ken Coates:

He would be very embarrassed to offer the Russians the Fourteenth Congress of the Czechoslovak Communist Party on a flight of aeroplanes.

Answer:

Yes, I see what you mean, but he would be very embarrassed to keep them on his soil. He was very embarrassed to keep Sik there.

Ken Coates:

We are not in business to worry about his embarrassment. We are in business to make a confrontation which enables people to liberate themselves...

Answer:

I agree with your point, yes. If that happened I should certainly belong to the people who greeted this type of consistency, unknown in the Party, and supported it. But there is another interpretation of this kind of thing. Many Party members, although they disagree with it, also claim that the Party was consistent in what they did because they always stressed their international feelings, they

always stressed that, above all, the important thing is to maintain the leading role of the Party inside the country, and unity within the Party, as you allowed in your most democratic stage, say, in the summer of 1968 when the new Constitution of the Party was being formulated and which was due to be passed at the legal Party Congress in September, and they allowed for the various factions to be legalised. This was the point at which the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia reached its most democratic stage. Even at that stage they stressed the leading role of the Party. It was also stressed that they should have international co-operation with other Communist Parties in other socialist countries and in Western countries and maintain that unity, and therefore avoid clashes with the powerful Communist Parties and with their closest allies. This was always a consistent policy of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. To resist foreign troops is one thing. To go totally in opposition against another Communist Party with whom you have had the closest ties since your Party was created is another thing.

Ken Coates:

But you see, they had an option which the Rumanians have taken, which was to develop fraternal relations with the Chinese. If they had opened up fraternal relations with the Chinese, I don't doubt that they would not have been "liberated" by the Russians, because if you reach the point of formalising relations between Czechoslovakia and China it would have been more than the Russians dared do, if they did not want a renewal of operations on the Eastern fronts.

Answer:

Yes. Can I ask you one small question? When did Rumania really try to formalise or to enter friendly relations with China?

Ken Coates:

Soon after the example of Czechoslovakia. They were wise after the event.

Answer:

That is what I wanted to hear. I heard this kind of suggestion from many Czech communists after August 1968, when they realized how important such a thing was. To discuss this before 21 August you would enter non-understanding.

Ken Coates:

A fantasy world?

Answer:

Yes. Why? We have a negative attitude to certain things which are being done in the name of socialism in the Soviet Union. We are afraid of the Soviet Union but we do not believe they will attack us militarily. Twelve years ago they did it in Hungary, but in Hungary the events were of a different nature. This is peaceful reform and we don't want to leave the Warsaw Pact. We don't want to be neutral. This is a different thing, and the Moscow comrades do understand it. They have different attitudes to certain of our internal reforms, but they understand this is not a counter-revolution They will not attack with arms. We have certain disagreements on policy matters with the comrades in China. Why would we then enter a friendly alignment with China against the Soviet Union, not vice versa? Why should we fear one and not the other?

Ken Coates:

It would not have been against the Soviet Union.

Answer:

Yes. You need not formulate it like that, but then its objective result would be. And if you talk honestly to Party comrades whom you want to persuade to adopt such a policy, you will certainly mention that the Soviet comrades will interpret it as an act against them. The general policy adopted by the Party before 21 August, and, in fact, by the whole nation, was to avoid everything which might give the Russians an excuse to attack us, not only militarily but also politically, to down articles, to avoid caricatures, to avoid criticisms etc. Such an act would be clearly interpreted as an anti-Soviet act.

Ken Coates:

There was a report in the English Press that NATO were informed of the intervention one week before it took place and that this information was passed right down to the base level of NATO, and that in this country three Cabinet Ministers were aware one week before that the intervention was going to take place. Would it have made much difference if that information had got out?

Answer:

To Czechoslovakia?

Ken Coates:

Yes.

Answer:

It is very difficult to answer that because I myself believe that the information was there. I don't know whether it was there a week before, or more likely just a few days before.

Ken Coates:

Well, how were they all taken with their pants off? Was that all a pantomime?

Answer:

What was very significant was the reaction when the official news broke out. If we for a minute disregard the very clear information that many Party leaders knew, perhaps not exactly the date and the hour, but that such a thing was being prepared; and some of them knew the date and the hour, I think. But to judge this you ought to concentrate on the reaction of the leaders of the country, the Party leaders, when they heard the official news; when the Minister of Defence telephoned Cernik on that evening and said "Just now the troops of the Allies have crossed the border". Cernik reported it to the Praesidium which was in full session. In any other civilised country the leaders of the country, when hearing that foreign troops were crossing their border, would go into action. Any kind of action. They would try to inform the people, the army, try to either prepare for defence or go into hiding themselves, or prepare for illegal work - any kind of action, according to the political and military situation and other factors. There are rare examples of the reaction which the Czech leaders had. They stood around and the First Secretary made a political speech defending his past political actions, trying to persuade his comrades in that hour that he was always a good socialist and had never adopted any anti-Soviet opinions, reading out the Brezhnev letter accusing him and going paragraph after paragraph, trying to persuade the rest of the Praesidium that Brezhnev was wrong in his accusations. I know how laughable it seems when you describe it like that, but a typical Party reaction. Even in that hour, when they heard officially that the troops were going to Prague, they still believed that it was a political quarrel, a quarrel between Communist Parties on a matter of policy, and therefore, as policy is always conducted in that part of the world by Communist leaders in Communist circles, when the troops reached Prague, just after midnight, everything would be prepared for a new set of discussions between Communist leaders of each country which would start, say, the following morning. And they were then preparing for tough negotiations, for they still believed that there would be negotiations between the Party leaders of the two respective countries which would start the next morning in Prague, with them being free. They were very surprised, genuinely surprised, that they were arrested and taken to Moscow.

Ken Coates:

So what were all the soldiers for?

Answer:

To give the Russians a position of strength from which it is always easier to negotiate.

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